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ABSTRACT

This report documents a study of women superintendents. Specifically, the study identified professional and personal characteristics and styles of leadership to develop archetypes of six outstanding female superintendents in Texas. The intent of the research was also to reveal similarities between and among these superintendents that could provide insights into their backgrounds, relationships, feelings, and beliefs through they use of qualitative methodology based on the use of an inductive content-analysis technique to reveal patterns and frameworks that would reveal an overall profile of a successful female superintendent. The data collected for the study were first obtained from an earlier study of ways in which six outstanding female superintendents learned from failure. In the current study, eight recurring leadership themes emerged from the inductive data analysis: (1) vision, shared vision, and visioning; (2) ethical and professional behaviors; (3) dreaming, thinking, creating, intuiting, and introspecting; (4) communication; (5) motivation; (6) commitment; (7) work ethic and industry; and (8) energy and stamina. From the eight themes came the archetypes of outstanding women superintendents. (WFA)

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ARCHETYPES OF OUTSTANDING FEMALE SUPERINTENDENTS

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ED 481 622

Women are destined to rule the schools of every city . . . . In the near future we will have more women than men in the executive charge of the vast educational system. It is a woman's natural field, and she is no longer to do the greatest part of the work and yet be denied leadership. It will be my aim to prove that no mistake has been made and to show critics and friends alike that a woman is better qualified for this work than a man.(Glass, 2000).

Ella Flagg Young, 1909, at her appointment to the
Superintendency of Chicago City Schools

Introduction

Suffrage efforts in the early 1900s boosted women into educational leadership roles. At this time, superintendents throughout the United States were selected through county elections. (Blount,1999). Because many of these county districts had male superintendents who were corrupt and used dishonest financial and administrative practices, women were elected to replace many of the men who had previously held these positions. The victories of these female superintendent were sustained by honesty, credibility, and success in their roles, and by 1930, Blount noted that women held nearly 28% of the nation's superintendencies. In a move to "turn out the ladies," however, male superintendent groups began a national political effort to have school superintendents appointed instead of electing them. These powerful men did not want women to retain their elected positions as superintendents and argued that superintendents should not be elected in public elections that were so "politically charged." The voters did not see through this political ruse and agreed to the appointment of school superintendents instead of an elective process. Because the people who were set up to appoint the superintendents were all men, the women who previously held superintendents began to decline; thereafter, males were appointed to nearly all of the superintendent's positions across the nation. As a result, female superintendents all but disappeared in the United States after several decades of progress had been made.

The struggle in the twentieth century for all women in the United States, but particularly for those in education, has been to find their individual and collective voices in order to proclaim

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their significance (Dunlap & Schmuck, 1995). Voices once silenced, however, have now been heard as more women than ever before have begun to seek leadership roles in American public schools. Although about 14% of women now hold positions as school superintendents (Brunner, 2001), female leaders at all levels continue to be constrained in many ways in their efforts to become successful school administrators. Research studies regarding women in educational administration reveal many critical problems that women face in entering and being successful in administrative careers. In spite of the difficulties regarding entry into educational leadership, however, female educators continue to enter the field of administration regardless of the continuing discrimination in hiring and promotion and other barriers, both external and internal (Edson, 1988).

History and Background

According to Edson (1988), women who enter the field of school leadership do so because they wish to meet the challenges inherent in leadership roles and believe that they can provide children with more positive educational experiences than they see being provided now. Although the literature regarding female leaders in education reveals that more women than ever before are entering administrative roles, "There is still much we do not know about sex discrimination, about female career patterns, about women leaders, and about inclusive conceptualizations of managerial and administrative theory" (Dunlap & Schmuck, 1995, p. xi). Recent research studies regarding female administrators in leadership positions in education reveal that they differ not only by gender from male administrators but also lead quite differently as well. The leadership styles of these women reveal that they are perceived by others as change agents (Wesson & Grady, 1995), use interactive leadership, (Funk, 1998), practice transformational leadership, (Aburdene & Naisbitt, 1992), provide a leadership advantage through webs of inclusion and nuturing (Helgesen, 1990), and exhibit empathy, sensitivity, caring, supporting, compassion, patience, organization, and attention to detail (Funk, 1998). With regard to the need for more women in school leadership positions, Shakeshaft (1989) indicates that women more often than men are identified as highly successful principals.

Although research results reveal that female administrators lead quite differently from males and are gaining some ground in administrative positions and power, many have not been able to make their intended leadership impact because of barriers that continue to prohibit them from being selected for key leadership roles. Women with new leadership styles are desperately needed for successful school reform efforts with their communicative and integrative styles (Funk, 1998). By utilizing their unique strengths, including collaborative and transformation leadership, a focus on curriculum and instruction, inclusion of all clienteles in decision-making, empowerment of teachers, students, and parents, and articulation of new visions of what schools should be, female leaders of public schools and school districts could make the difference needed to ensure successful changes in education. At this point, however, these women continue to be

underutilized by school boards and superintendents who do not utilize the talents of their aspiring and practicing female school leaders to make a real difference in the quality of schooling in our nation.

As noted by Irby and Brown (1998), however, "it is important that women's current poor representation in formal school leadership is not necessarily an inherent condition of the institution of schooling but rather is the result of social interactions that have unfolded in specific historical contexts" (p. 8). This statement reveals the sociological nature of some of the problems embedded within American culture that must be remedied in order to remove these barriers in order to achiever equity for women in educational leadership. In a similar vein, Shakeshaft (1989) noted that only a handful of models have been developed to explain the theoretical underpinnings of the barriers that prohibit or limit the entrance of many women into leadership positions in education. According to this author, these barriers for aspiring women in education are internal as well as external and could originate from psychological factors such as motivation and self-efficacy. In addition, organizational theory could provide information on the impact of the structure and operation of schools and determinants of opportunity and power on female leadership aspirants or those who wish to be promoted to higher levels. One of the most critical barriers that Shakeshaft describes is that of Androcentrism--the practice of viewing the world and shaping reality from a male perspective that leads to sex discrimination.

Not much is known about the 14% of female superintendents who are serving as school districts in the United States (Brunner, 2001); however, recent research does indicate that more diversity exists among female superintendents than their male counterparts. Female superintendents are more often minorities, Democrats' Catholic or Jewish, and either never married or are widowed or divorced, revealing very different profiles from male superintendents who are Anglo, Republican, and married. Bruner also indicates that many women who have been able to achieve the position of superintendent have resigned their school leadership roles and have taken a lower position in another school district because of the lack of support from some school board members and district stakeholders soon after they occupied these positions. At this point, however, many of the reasons why that these executive women have left their positions as superintendents are either not neither known nor well understood. Without more information regarding the characteristics of female superintendents who are highly successful in their roles, changes cannot be made regarding changes in superintendent preparation programs to assist those women who are now walking away from their positions as superintendents. According to Bruner (1999), research studies that focus on women in school administration are conducted by almost entirely by women, perhaps indicating that this literature is not considered to be an important field of study for many other researchers in education

Purpose of the Study and Methodology

The purpose of this study was to identify professional and personal characteristics and styles of leadership in order to develop archetypes of six outstanding female superintendents in Texas. The intent of the research was also to reveal similarities between and among these women that could provide insights their backgrounds, relationships, feelings, and beliefs through the use of a qualitative methodology based on the use of an inductive content analysis technique to reveal patterns and frameworks that would reveal an overall profile of a successful female superintendent. The data collected for use in this study were first obtained by Pankake, Schroth, and Funk (2000) in their study regarding ways in which six outstanding female superintendents learned from failures in their lives. The six subjects in this study were current or retired female superintendents who had been nominated for or awarded the Texas Association of School Boards' Outstanding Superintendent of the Year award. Warren Bennis (1989) developed the interview questions for his book, *On Becoming a Leader* (1989) and gave his permission for the researchers to use the questions in the structured interviews that were conducted.

Characteristics Themes of Outstanding Female Superintendents

The characteristics and themes revealed in the data analysis provided a collective view of these six outstanding female superintendents and led to the identification of the qualities of leadership that were identified in the content analysis process. They include the leadership characteristics, essential superintendents' roles, necessary qualities of leadership, and critical skills that define these outstanding female superintendents.

Leadership Qualities

The following leadership qualities include characteristics, essential leadership roles, qualities, and critical skills for outstanding female school superintendents.

- Leadership characteristics of these outstanding superintendents include: being brave, caring, creative, courageous, committed, confident, energetic, healthy, honest, industrious, introspective, intuitive, knowledgeable, open-minded, passionate, pragmatic, reflective, responsible, risk-taking, trustworthy, and well-informed.

- Essential leadership roles that these women school executives described were: analyzer, change agent, communicator, delegator, dreamer, hirer, nurturer, reader, risk-taker, and team-builder.

• Qualities needed by successful superintendents include character, integrity, vision, courage, and passion.

• Critical skills for female superintendents are visioning, determining the real needs for their districts, communicating, hiring the right people, delegating, developing team support, working effectively with people, and producing meaningful and lasting change.

Leadership Themes

Eight recurring themes that emerged from the inductive data analysis include: being a visionary, acting professionally and ethically, allowing time for dreaming and creating, communicating effectively and often, motivating staff and self, being truly committed to their leadership role and to children, having a strong work ethic, and having the energy and stamina in order to do their jobs. Each of these themes are presented below are more fully entitled and described, and relevant quotes are presented in an effort to provide a more personal view from the participants.

1. Vision, shared vision, and visioning

The most frequently mentioned theme of leadership by the female superintendents was vision. These women spoke of having their own visions, their process of visioning, and ensuring that everyone who worked with them shared their vision with one another, creating a collective vision. Most of these outstanding leaders noted that vision was the most important quality to have as superintendents. These women described how they operationalized the vision concept, and one of these women even noted that you "can't teach it but you could "hone it." The following quotes from these women show the necessity of visioning as an educational leader.

• Being a visionary is part creativity and part courage; a visionary has to have some glimpse of *what can be*. It has to be a little bit out beyond where the rest of the group is but not too far beyond because if you don't share the dream, you begin to lose them.
• Part of being a visionary is being able to put pieces of information together and come up with a new slant or a new way to look at things--that is part of what sets a leader apart from an administrator.

• I think leaders need vision, and I was at one time of the belief that you could teach that, I am no longer have that belief. We have a lot of management people who are clearly outstanding in crisis-to-crisis management, but if you give them a blank sheet of paper--

(and ask) where do you want to be, they will ask me, 'what do you want me to do.' They can't see really what it looks like in their minds.

• To establish a vision for the organization, it can't be done unilaterally. Probably the most important thing I do is to get out front and make sure that I'm not out there by myself.

2. Ethical and professional behaviors

Within this area, these female superintendents noted that character, integrity, honesty, determination, commitment, fairness, and responsibility were important characteristics as well as acting on their principles, not compromising, and doing what is right regardless of the circumstances. The following quotes represent some of the strong feelings held by these female leaders about being professional and ethical in the superintendency.

• Keep to your principles! Don't compromise!

• I was known for my honesty and integrity, and the community trusted me.

• I think that the qualities of leadership are integrity and honesty. To be honest you have to be brave, and bravery is having the ability to do what is right regardless of the consequences.

• Character is integrity and the basis for everything else! If you don't have integrity, then you don't have anything.

• If you are not going to deal fairly with people, if you are not going to keep faith with the best, then you don't have any business being in this business.

• Just don't attack my personal integrity. And when somebody does, that's it.

3. Dreaming, thinking, creating, intuiting, and introspecting

This "inward-looking" set of affective skills and feelings is closely related to visioning, and these internal activities could also be viewed as the central components necessary to build a vision. Items in this category were often mentioned, however, without addressing visioning, thereby earning its own place in this skill set needed to be a visionary leader. Some of the quotes that provide some insights into examples of these prominent skills in the study are given below.

• I think leaders are more intuitive than other people. Not everything is something for which there is a rule or law.

• I think that it is especially important in dealing with people, to be intuitive to be able too get a feel for what is going on because you know it.

• I believe firmly that a leader has to be a visionary. One of my favorite things is to ask them to dream about the future--beyond what they can do. I think it is essential that you build in thinking and dreaming--visioning time.

• I've finally figured out what my greatest fear is. . . (that) I am going to be so inundated with putting out fires and administrivia that I won't have time to dream. . . (that) I won' t have time to look ahead. Each one of my principals knows that they have to have a designated "dream person."

4. Communication

This category of skills includes communicating with people, keeping them informed, having the ability to relate to people, and specifically communicating well with the school board in order to have good board-superintendent relations. The skill of reaching others through open and honest interaction with all stakeholders appears to be a "make or break " issue for a successful superintendency.

• I think leadership carries with it a real need to clearly communicate. I've found that about 90% of the difficulties I've encountered have been based on lack of or no communication.

• I didn't want them (the board) to read it in the paper. I never wanted them to be surprised. And I didn't want them to surprise me either. I didn't want to hear at the board table something I should have heard ahead of time. I told them going in, that I would try never to surprise you, and I won't let you get caught by questions in your civic club.

• Another area of leadership that you really can overlook is superintendent-board relations. If you do, you won't be here very long. Board-superintendent relations are critical. If you can't pull that off, then you can forget your vision.

• Be up front with everything (with the board), I tell all--don't omit anything!
• I knew how to keep my mouth closed—a very important attribute wherever you are in school administration.

• Information is power and an organization that doesn't keep people informed or doesn't even want them to be informed--that is cruelty of the first order. It shows that you don't trust them and don't respect them. If you really want to keep someone from growing or getting promoted, don't let them know what is going on.

5. Motivation

Being committed to do the right thing for the children is one of the more powerful traits that a superintendent can have. These successful school executives revealed that it is necessary to be determined to make things better for students, keep to your principles, be responsible, do what is right regardless of the circumstances, and don't compromise when student welfare is involved. Commitment is also reflected in a superintendent's initiative, industry, and perseverance. The critical nature of the presence of commitment is revealed by the comments these outstanding superintendents who were the subjects in this study.

• I think that the most important thing any superintendent does is to hire the right people.

• If I were to take it one step further than that I think probably the most important people I hire are principals.

• I think that leadership has to be based on valuing other people--encouraging and offering t hem to grow and develop capacity.

• I think that leadership has to be based on valuing other people--encouraging and offering them to grow and develop capacity.

• I guess that lots of people have potential for leadership if given the opportunity to have the potential freedom to grow. My style of leadership is to always recognize that it truly takes a team.

• I think a reward system is important. We don't have merit pay, but there are lots of ways to recognize people for their accomplishments and their good jobs as leaders. You tell someone that they are doing a good job and they will bust it to do an even better job next time.

6. Commitment

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- Don't go into school administration if you are not willing to work and work and work.

You don't count hours; you do what needs to be done. I think you have to be willing to persevere and stick with it and give what it takes in terms of time.

- I hung in there because it was right for the children.
- If you are not willing to go out on a limb to make things better than they have been, willing to do something different, willing to lead people and lead your school and your board into different ways of looking at things and into adopting new programs and approaches, you won't make it. It takes courage to do that--to continue to stand for something you think that needs badly to be done when nobody else wants to do it!

- When something doesn't work or when something works wrong, it's a challenge to get it right.

- My attitude is that you can kill me but you can't eat me!

7. Work ethic and industry

The characteristics of outstanding female superintendents include a strong work ethic, industry, initiative, determination, responsibility, and being a willing worker. These skills appear to be evident in each of these executive women.

- Make sure you want this job before going for it. This job involves lots of work!

- We had a strong middle-class work ethic. I don't ever remember my mother or father missing a day of work—that wasn't an option in our home. Work was fun; they never came home complaining. That ethic was a strong factor in who I am, no question.

• I admired my dad because of his work ethics and his personality. Everyone was equal in my dad's eyes. He never met a stranger, and it didn't matter if you were rich or poor.

• Well, I go back to my father; most certainly, I did admire him. I don't have a whole lot of respect for people who don't have strong work ethics.

• I admire hard work. I also admire I don't have a whole lot of respect for people who don't have strong work ethics.

8. Energy and Stamina

This category represents the need noted by these women school executives for energy, stamina, and good health in order to be able to do their work successfully. The following statements reveal these superintendents' need for physical stamina and high energy to do all that they need to accomplish.

• You need to be healthy and have physical stamina to do this job.

• I think it takes an extraordinary person who can cope with the demands of school administration, especially the superintendency and not be a strong person physically.

• I hate to say this but I see so many waiting to get prodded to go and do things, things that they know should be done, but it is easier not to add one more thing to their plate. They are tired and it is really sad.

• One of the reasons I retired was because I saw that I was not as strong. That played a large part in my decision to retire.

Archetypes of Outstanding Female Superintendents

Based on the synthesis of the qualities and themes, the statements below represent an integration of the categories and themes of this study that led to the creation of the archetypes of outstanding female superintendents presented below.

• Successful female superintendents are knowledgeable, hard-working women who select the right people for positions in their district, motivate them to share a collective vision,

model their strong commitment to children, and produce meaningful and lasting change in schools.

• Successful female superintendents are creative, energetic executives who take purposeful risks on behalf of schools and children by developing strong team support, communicating effectively with all stakeholders, and operationalizing their collaborative vision into clear patterns of action that make a difference in the lives of children.

• Successful female superintendents are professional, ethical, and honest leaders who have a passion and an intuitive feel for their educational roles, model a strong work ethic, and model life-long learning for all district personnel.

• Successful female superintendents are caring, reflective leaders who brave the currents of discord and politics in order to creative a supportive climate throughout the school district, work effectively and confidently with all stakeholders, and use delegation as a powerful tool in order to ensure trust and confidence in all personnel.

• Successful female superintendents are passionate, courageous professionals who act on their principles, do the right thing regardless of the circumstances, and are trusted by district stakeholders.

• Successful female superintendents are fair, determined women who model integrity in their roles, are pragmatic, intuitive, and introspective leaders, and they remain open-minded in their decision-making processes.

• Successful school superintendents are responsible, well-informed school executives who exhibit strong personal character, reach others through open and honest interactions, and maintain effective superintendent-school board relationships.

• Successful female school superintendents are passionate, confident women who are dreamers and creators, think out of the box, use their imagination to see and realize their visions, and have a true feel for what is going on in the district.

• Successful female school superintendents are open-minded, introspective role models who care and value all clienteles, encourage them to develop capacity, and give them the freedom to grow.

Summary and Conclusions

This research study regarding the archetypes of outstanding female superintendents in Texas revealed strengths, styles, attitudes and beliefs of women who have been highly successful in the demanding and often difficult role of school superintendent. In spite of the complicated and challenging environments in which all superintendents operate, some female superintendents more often have a difficult time becoming superintendents than men, while others have more difficulty in retaining their positions, much less becoming highly successful in their roles. This analysis of outstanding female superintendents has provided some insights into the leadership typologies that were revealed through their participation in this research project. Through their participation with the researchers, they now provide aspiring female administrators with the knowledge that women can and will be outstanding school superintendents and have provided the field of educational administration with important insights into their leadership profiles, characteristics, critical styles and skills, administrative strengths, personal insights, character, creative abilities, communication styles, motivational strategies, and commitment to doing the best for children.

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